Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 53 Article 20

February 2018

Talking Back: The Quality of Mercy at the Heart of Sanctuary

Paul Lakeland

The Parable of the Good Samaritan by Jan Wijnants (1670)

TALKING BACK

The Quality of Mercy at the Heart of Sanctuary

By Paul Lakeland

Looking at the spectacular issue of *Conversations* (Fall 2017, "Sanctuary for Truth and Justice") I reflected on all the wonderful initiatives talked about in those pages. Something, I thought, has to link all that we do with all that we are, something that connects the bonds that tie us together with the bonds we try loose among those to whom we reach out. I want to suggest that this something is the virtue of mercy.

Mercy helps us see what to do with our critical and sophisticated grasp of what our world is really like. Mercy, in fact, can be two related, but quite distinct, things. First, mercy can mean withholding or easing up on the punishment or suffering someone actually deserves. When a judge imposes only a light sentence on a person convicted of a crime with extenuating circumstances, we call it mercy. And when we go easy on a friend who has deeply offended us, this is also the same kind of mercy. This is *mercy as leniency*. But there is another and perhaps more important understanding of mercy, closer certainly to the mind of Pope Francis and to St. Ignatius' call to a generous life. When we do something to alleviate the suffering of another person who has done no wrong and doesn't deserve the suffering he or she is undergoing, we are practicing mercy. This is *mercy as healing*, and it works in surprising ways. In this second kind of mercy, we encounter what Miranda Richard in her *Conversations* article (Becoming "Us" in a Polarized Age) called "the Jesuit tradition of compassion, empathy, and service" (26-27).

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The Samaritan is a stranger and an outcast – a heretic whom the good people of first century Judaea despised. He comes to the aid of someone who has been robbed and left for dead. Respectable religious leaders have "passed by on the other side." But the Samaritan, who has no responsibility for this person, goes out of his way to help, providing aid and finances to assure the other's recovery. The man left for dead does not deserve the suffering, and the Samaritan has no responsibility to help him. The Samaritan acts in this compassionate way because, well, because this is the kind of person he is. He would have done the same for someone else, and perhaps had done so many times before. So this single act of mercy displays not simply a merciful act but the practice of someone who is consistently merciful. It shows one instance of how the virtue of mercy could be at work in healing the world.

This understanding of mercy needs to saturate the culture of our universities. We get a hint about

its importance from the treatment of the parable in the writings of the great French philosopher Simone Weil. When Weil analyzes the parable, she sees that the bleeding victim needs something to restore him to his full humanity, namely, the care and concern of another. The Samaritan divests himself, if only of money, but by doing so he grows into a richer humanity. Now of course we rarely if ever encounter someone on our campus who is in anything like the man in dire need whom the Samaritan encounters. But if we keep our eyes and our hearts open, there will be many calls upon us on some days, and some calls upon us almost every day. Explicitly or not, we are constantly asked to give of ourselves. The demands that are made upon us by living in community do cost us, our time or energy if not money. But the costs are returned to us many times over in the rich growth of our human capacities to be vulnerable in face of the needs of the other.

Jesuit universities are called to model the kind of society in which we would all like to live. This is the sanctuary that Howard Gray talks about ("Sanctuary for the Heart," 8-10), though it should be our wish for such sanctuary to be unnecessary. Sanctuary should be the air the whole world breathes. As we struggle to be sanctuary, we recognize that we are far from perfect. But we know that the direction in which we must move is towards recognizing the full humanity of all those around us. So, the way we treat one another, the way we speak of one another, especially of those who are somehow different from us, is either a building block towards a better world or a vote for destruction. Transfer the lesson of the gift-exchange to our campuses today: the person of color has much to teach the possessor of white privilege, and sometimes the opposite is true. In the exchange between the two, perhaps understanding and, yes, even love may begin to flourish. We are gay and straight, black and brown and yellow and white, rich and poor, men and women. We have transgendered people in our community. We are Christians and Buddhists and Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and people of no religion at all. Some of us are beneficiaries of President Barak Obama's DACA program for so-called Dreamers, at least for now. Some of us are people suffering from addiction. And some of us are ill, physically or mentally. But as the story of the Good Samaritan shows, the practice of mercy transcends all these differences.

I am reminded of some words of Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, where he wrote:

> Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

Mercy requires the courage to be vulnerable, the kind of courage that carried Dorothy Day through a lifetime of engagement with the urban poor. She saw the connections between desperate poverty and homelessness on the one hand and a society driven by greed on the other. You may find it shocking when she says, "Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy, rotten system." But I hope you see the wisdom of her conviction that "the greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?"

I have suggested that at this stage of life, here in the incubator of a college education, our way is to study hard so as to truly know the world and to practice the virtue of mercy towards one another, especially to the dragons in our lives. It's a simple equation: learning + virtue = wisdom. Our world and our lives may be full of what appear to us as dragons. Our national and global leaders certainly give most of us pause for thought. But a little more love and mercy can turn at least some of them into princesses.

Paul Lakeland is director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University. His most recent book is The Wounded Angel: Fiction and Religious Imagination *(Liturgical Press, 2017). He explains, "The book explores the relationship between the act of faith and the act of reading. Really."*